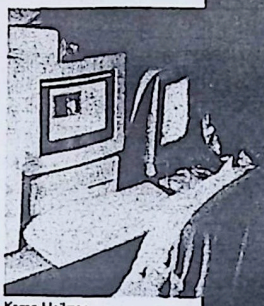
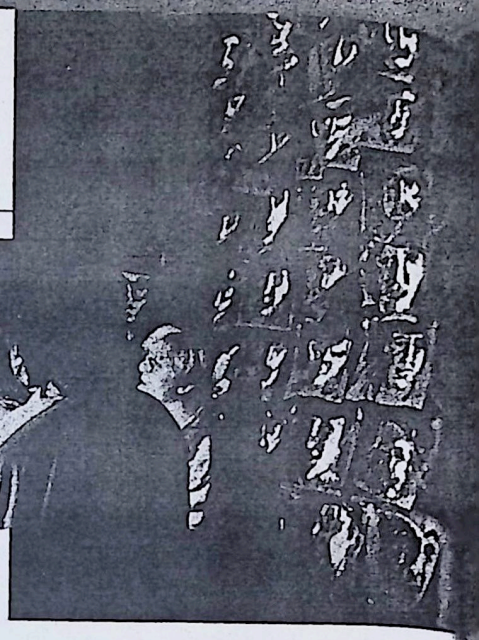
# Cyberthon 1.0

*BY RICHARD KADREY*



Karen Heilman



ON OCTOBER sixth and seventh, 1990, the Whole Earth Institute built a ten-foot-high maze in the main soundstage at Colossal Pictures in San Francisco, transforming the place into "Cyberthon," a 24-hour virtual-reality marathon, conference, fair, exposition and running debate. Over three hundred of four hundred Cyberthon participants got the chance to try on goggles and gloves and enter artificial worlds created by pioneering companies like VPL, Autodesk and Sense8.

The presentations weren't all high-tech, though. Marin County's Antenna Theater handed out Sony Walkmans and let people contemplate jumping from their mock-up of the Golden Gate Bridge; for several hours, Sharon Grace from the San Francisco Art Institute performed a live remote video piece for one viewer at a time.

Cyberthon was an occasion built around the emerging virtual reality technology, but it was as much a cultural event as a techno-fest. For the first time anywhere, Cyberthon brought together Berkeley acid-heads, techie nerds, art damage punks, and the people who are actually building cyberspace, such as Scott Fisher, Myron Krueger, Jaron Lanier, Warren Robinette, and Randy Walser, with the people who think about virtual reality's implications for the future, such as John Perry Barlow, William Gibson, Terence McKenna, Howard Rheingold, and Bruce Sterling.

After twenty-four straight hours, most Cyberthoners were running on sugar, caffeine and pure adrenalin. Personal realities were shifting without the aid of machines. When it was over, Cyberthon was being called everything from "the Acid Test of the Nineties" to "Nerdstock." It was a preview of an embryonic technology that promises to turn what we normally call "reality" inside out. Cyberthon participants got the answer to the question "Where is virtual reality right now?," but better yet, they came away with new questions, like "How do we define reality when we can each shape our own?," "Who will control VR technology?," and "What happens to transportation, telecommunications and the human body when you can direct whole areas of your life from inside your computer?"

ABOVE: Analog and digital technology worked together in one booth as volunteers used a videocam to digitize the faces of Cyberthon participants. While Cyberthoners were having their faces recorded electronically, an artist working at a second terminal used rice paper and Japanese *sumi-e* paints to capture each face for a Cyberthon "rogue's gallery" on the opposite wall. Eventually, the digitized faces will be turned into a HyperCard stack, with copies going to everyone who was recorded.

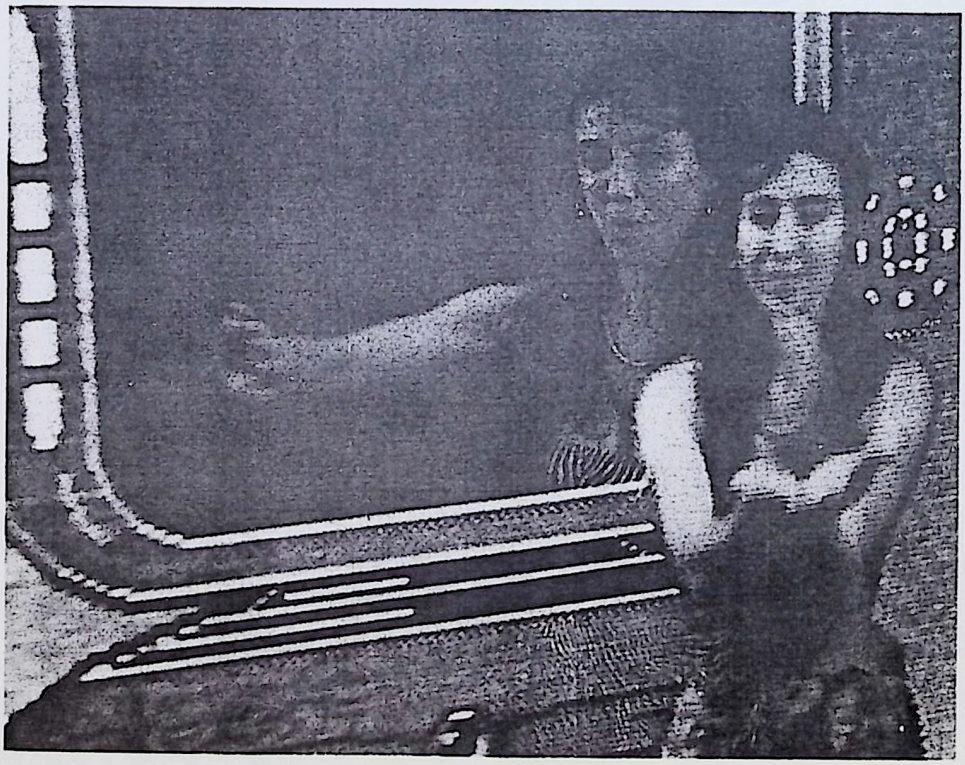
BELOW: Cyberpunk author William Gibson, Stewart Brand and Wellbeing Elliot Fabric talk in the food area, where a crowd and good conversation lasted from the time Cyberthon's doors opened to well past closing, twenty-four hours later.

Patricia Ris

Karen Heilman

Patricia Ris

LEFT: The game room was one of the best places to relax and peoplewatch. You could play hand-held versions of arcade video games, drive a stunt car around a virtual track, complete with bridge jumps and flaming crashes, or play a convincing game of golf with a Japanese CD-ROM-based unit. It didn't take long for a colony of pure game freaks to emerge, mostly young guys who couldn't be lured from the room even by Timothy Leary's talks or 3D computer graphics or the chance to try on goggles and gloves.



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LEFT: Mandala's "Virtual World System" let Cyberthoners play a virtual drumset by beating their hands in the air, or move different images around on a wallsize video screen. Here, photographer and artist Faustin Bray plays catch with a video bubble.

Karen Heilman

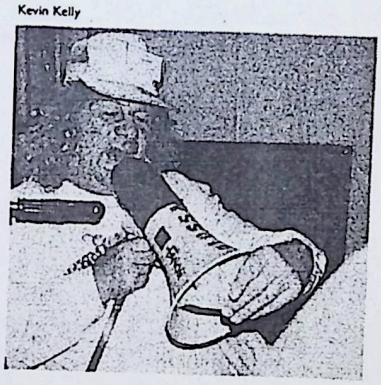
LEFT: Myron Krueger, sometimes called the grandfather of virtual reality, talks with some of the next generation of VR pioneers.

Krueger has maintained for decades that gesture and body movement is the best way for people to interact with computers. Since the seventies he has worked in his Connecticut lab, the Video Place, using computers that respond to human movement to create "responsive environments," experimental art spaces that let people and computers interact, *sans* keyboards or screens.

Patricia Ris

RIGHT: Sunday morning, twenty-one hours into Cyberthon, VPL's virtual-reality pioneer Jaron Lanier, Colossal Pictures executive Lawrence Wilkinson, and Whole Earth's Stewart Brand toss out ideas and opinions about the social impact of virtual reality to several hundred sleep-deprived stalwarts. The consensus of the panelists was that technologically, VR is a good ten to fifteen years from producing the kind of truly convincing experience that mimics reality. Brand especially cautioned against becoming discouraged during the next few years while everyone waits for the Next Big Breakthrough.

Kevin Kelly



LEFT: Wavy Gravy, veteran political activist and clown, pulled names for the Cyberthon VR lottery. Lucky winners got to put on the goggles and gloves and enter virtual environments created by VPL, Autodesk and Sense8.

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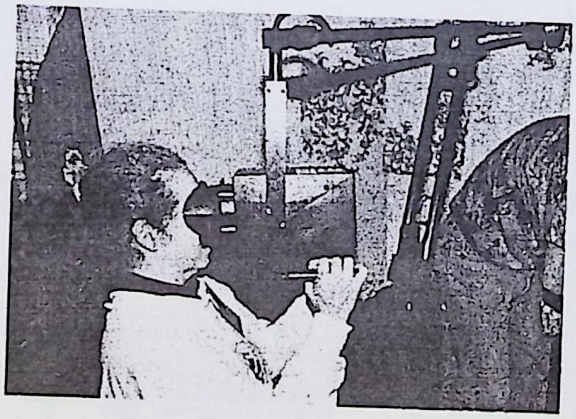
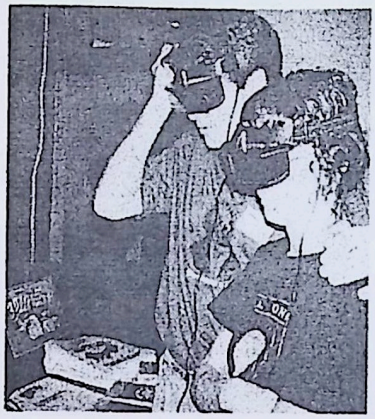


ABOVE: Wendy Kellog from the IBM Research Center tries out Fake Space Lab's BOOM. The BOOM (Binocular Omni-Orientation Monitor) is a simple remote imaging device that uses two videocams mounted on a turntable capable of turning in any direction or panning up and down. The videocams mimic the movements of the person using the BOOM's "periscope" viewer, sending back images to a pair of Sony Watchman screens mounted inside the periscope's hood.

RIGHT: At 3 AM Sunday morning, Wavy Gravy was still working, having the audience blow raspberries in paper bag hoods, turning them into human kazoos, as he told a long and convoluted Coyote story. It was a welcome moment of humor and rest after fifteen hours of computer displays, caffeine, video presentations, and the omnipresent voices of hundreds of other Cyberthon participants debating what they'd just seen.

RIGHT: Three-dimensional kung fu movies, cartoons, and a Japanese-produced tour through the solar system were some of the highlights of the 3D TV display at Cyberthon. Special 3D videotapes play on a regular television equipped with an optical "stereo" device that digitally turns flat TV images into realistic 3D.



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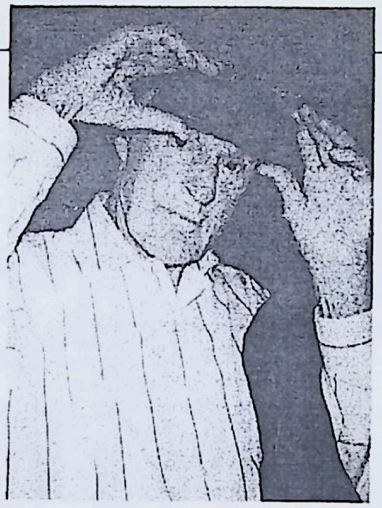

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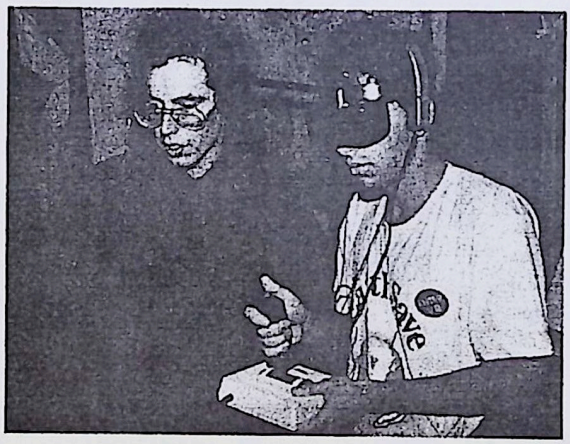
LEFT: Cyberthon speaker Timothy Leary tries on 3D goggles. In the fifties, Leary was a straitlaced college professor; in the sixties, a psychedelic prophet; in the seventies, a political prisoner and fugitive; in the eighties, he was designing software; now, in the nineties, he's exploring the possibilities of virtual reality. John Perry Barlow once described Leary as a "reverse canary in a coal mine" — whatever Leary is interested in, the mass culture will discover a few years down the road.

Patricia Ris



LEFT: State-of-the-art 3D computer graphics were well represented at Cyberthon. Here, J. Matisse Enzer, leader of the team that built the Cyberthon maze, looks on as an unidentified friend learns to fly and to shoot down enemy jets in Fake Space Lab's three-dimensional battle scenario. The 3D goggles he is wearing are more complex than the red-and-blue lensed glasses you may have used at 3D movies. The goggles are equipped with an infrared sensor that times pulses in the lenses with the flicker of pixels on the video monitor to produce fluid 3D effects.

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ABOVE: A Cyberthoner entering Sense8's virtual office scene. By moving a track ball with his left hand, he can move forward and backward, side to side and up and down. On his right hand he's wearing a Mattel Power Glove, a $100 videogame interface. Sense8 has modified the glove so that the wearer can use it to smoothly move objects in their virtual office: a desk chair, a pen, books on a shelf. This was most people's first look at what may be, in larval form, the VR extension of modeming your work from home to work: actually entering your workplace each day without leaving home. ■

Kevin Kelly